



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: SAUDI ARABIA

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*To advance international
freedom of religion or
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confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

Religious Freedom Conditions in Saudi Arabia in 2019

By Scott Weiner, Policy Analyst

Introduction

Saudi Arabia has taken some limited steps toward greater religious freedom in 2019 while continuing to restrict it in other ways. On a positive note, Saudi Arabia eased religious restrictions on women's mobility in 2019 and allowed Saudi women for the first time to report births, marriages, and divorces. It also began issuing tourist visas and relaxed religious restrictions on dress for women visitors to the Kingdom. Yet at the same time, the government has conducted mass executions of Shi'a Muslims. It continued to detain several religious prisoners of conscience and severely mistreat activists who peacefully protested religious guardianship laws, and in official communications it described feminism as a form of radical extremism.

Saudi Arabia has shown a strong appetite for change following the 2016 announcement of Vision 2030, and it subsequently has made economic and social progress. However, religious freedom in the Kingdom remains severely restricted. No non-Muslim minority is permitted to worship in public anywhere in the Kingdom. Saudis who do not ascribe to the government-endorsed, narrow interpretation of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence continue to face systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of their freedom of religion and belief. Saudi Arabia should take steps to remedy these violations. These include removing intolerant content about non-Sunni Muslims from textbooks, releasing religious prisoners of conscience, ending the religious guardianship system, and ceasing the harassment and persecution of Shi'a Muslims.

Mistreatment of Shi'a Muslims

Shi'a Muslims comprise 10–15 percent of Saudi Arabia's 33 million citizens. They face discrimination in education, employment, and the judiciary, and they [lack access](#) to senior positions in the government and military. Saudi textbooks also explicitly disparage Shi'a traditions, such as describing the veneration of prophets' gravesites as "heresy."

In April 2019, Saudi Arabia [executed](#) 37 men, including 32 Shi'a Muslims, on charges of terrorism and "attempting to spread the Shi'a confession." The Specialized Criminal Court based many of its convictions on confessions that security forces had allegedly coerced through torture.



Saudi authorities also targeted Shi'a Muslim children for persecution. Three of those executed in April were minors at the time they allegedly committed their crimes, a fact [condemned](#) by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet. In June, CNN reported that Saudi Arabia planned to [execute](#) Murtaja Qureiris, a Shi'a Muslim who authorities had arrested three years after his alleged participation in a peaceful protest in the Eastern Province at the age of 10. Saudi Arabia declined to execute Qureiris following international pressure, but he is still expected to remain in prison [until 2022](#).

Religious Freedom Restrictions on Women

While male guardianship of women grounded in religious roles is enshrined in the laws of many countries that claim Shari'ah as a guiding legal canon, Saudi Arabia's guardianship system is among the most extensive. In Saudi Arabia, religious guardianship laws relegate women to the status of minors for life. This framework violates their freedom of religion and belief by denying them the ability to choose the religious tenets by which they live and forcing them to accept the Saudi state's singular interpretation of Islam.

In 2019, Saudi Arabia took steps to implement USCIRF's [recommendation](#) that it "codify any informal easing of [the male guardianship] system in the kingdom." In August, the Kingdom [announced amendments](#) to articles 2 and 3 of the Travel Document Laws and articles 19, 30, 33, and 47 of the Civil Status Law. As a result of these amendments, Saudi women over the age of 21 would be

able to obtain passports and travel without a guardian's permission. The government also announced that women would be [allowed](#) to register births, marriages, and divorces; to be issued official family documents; and to serve as guardians to minors. These changes have seen slow adaptation by some Saudis in conservative areas of the country, but they represent genuine progress toward restoring the religious freedom rights of Saudi women.

The Saudi government uses two religious concepts to compel adherence to guardianship. The first is *'uquq*, or parental disobedience. A Saudi parent can file an *'uquq* complaint against a child via the Ministry of Justice website. Women charged with *'uquq* face imprisonment or forcible return to their homes, even if they fled domestic abuse.¹ The second religious concept invoked in guardianship enforcement is *taghayyub*, or absence from home. Saudi authorities use this principle as a pretext for using state resources to track down women who have fled and return them home. The authorities send some of these women to a State Oversight Home (*Dar al-Ri'aya al-Hakumiya*). Although the government describes these homes as shelters, some Saudi women describe them as [akin to prisons](#) in which they are surveilled, their menstrual cycles are recorded, and they are subject to flogging.

¹ Although a [2013 Saudi law](#) prohibits domestic violence, a [2017 study](#) found that 44.5 percent of Saudi women have been victimized by domestic abuse at some point in their lives.

Several Saudi women fled the Kingdom in high-profile incidents throughout 2019, citing violations of their freedom of belief under guardianship laws. In January 2019, [Rahaf Mohammed](#) fled to Thailand and, despite the Saudi government's repeated attempts to repatriate her, was granted asylum in [Canada](#). In March, [two Saudi sisters](#) known as “Reem” and “Radwan” received asylum in an unidentified country after Hong Kong had granted them temporary permission to stay when Saudi Arabia cancelled their passports while they were attempting to reach Australia. In May, [Maha and Wafa al-Subaie](#) gained asylum in an unidentified third country after fleeing to the Republic of Georgia. In June, [Doaa and Dalal al-Showeiki](#) fled to Turkey and claimed on social media that they had endured physical abuse and been threatened with transfer to a State Oversight Home.

Women who remain in Saudi Arabia also face an array of uphill legal battles due to the guardianship system. In 2019, U.S. citizen and Saudi legal resident Bethany Vierra [lost](#) a legal dispute with her ex-husband for custody of her four year-old daughter Zaina who is also a dual citizen. Saudi authorities questioned Vierra's claims on the grounds that she had not taught her daughter to read the Qur'an at the age of four, and that her husband had sworn in court “before Allah” that he has provided financial assistance despite evidence to the contrary.

Saudi Arabia arrested several women and men who peacefully protested guardianship laws in 2018, and most of them remain in prison. Prison authorities subjected many of them to [beating, electric shock, and whipping](#); sexual harassment and abuse is also common. [One woman was photographed naked](#) and shown the photos by male interrogators. In another reported case, two of the women detainees were [forced to kiss each other](#) in the presence of a male interrogator and whipped when they refused. Some were [hugged, kissed, and groped](#) while handcuffed by male interrogators. [Three](#) such anti-guardianship activists have since been released but others, including [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), remain in prison.

Saudi Arabia's government has equated women who seek greater freedom with extremists and terrorists. In January 2019, spokesman of the Saudi Presidency of State Security Major General Bassem Atia held a seminar at Qassim University in Buraida on “national security threats,” which included feminism. In February, the Saudi General Department for Counter Extremism posted a [video](#) to its Twitter feed comparing women who flee guardianship to terrorists. In November, it [released](#) a second video on Twitter claiming that feminism—along with atheism and homosexuality—represented forms of extremism and perversion. It later removed this video under international pressure.²



Slide entitled “Feminism: A Spiritual and Intellectual Kidnapping” at a Saudi Presidency of State Security lecture at Qasim University, January 29, 2019.

Also in November 2019, the General Department for Counter Extremism released a flyer via Twitter claiming “Feminism is a Radical Idea” with a bloody handprint at the top, and listed “types of radicalization and descent into sin” including “feminism,” “apostasy,” and “homosexuality,” among others.

² The Saudi Human Rights Commission issued an [additional statement](#) on its English language account regarding the video, clarifying that “feminism is not criminalized in Saudi Arabia.”



Social media flyer from the Saudi the General Department for Counter Extremism claiming “feminism is radical idea,” November 2019.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Saudi Arabia continues to detain and hold in custody people who challenge the government’s interpretation of the Hanbali Sunni jurisprudence. In August, the Kingdom [sentenced](#) Shi’a Muslim Sheikh Mohammed al-Habib to five years in prison and a subsequent five-year travel ban for [supporting protests](#) against government discrimination against Shi’a Muslims. The sentence adds to his existing [five-year sentence](#) for allegedly breaching an agreement not to incite violence, rebellion, or sedition against the rulers of Saudi Arabia. In September and October, the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh postponed hearings for Shi’a Muslim Sheikh [Salman al-Ouda](#), who faces the death penalty for spurious terrorism-related charges. Saudi Arabia also [arrested](#) his relative, Abdelaziz al-Ouda, in October.

Saudi Arabia also continues to detain USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience Raif Badawi, convicted in 2013 of “insulting Islam” over posts he made to his blog, *Free Saudi Liberals*. At the State Department’s July 2019 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Vice President Michael R. Pence called on Saudi Arabia to

[release Badawi](#). In September, [USCIRF expressed concern](#) over reports Saudi Arabia was denying Raif Badawi access to crucial medicine and books—conditions that led to Badawi declaring a temporary hunger strike. In December 2019, Saudi prison officials moved both Badawi and his lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, into solitary confinement, prompting a [second hunger strike](#).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Congress has continued to push Saudi Arabia to fight the lingering presence in its textbooks of intolerant language about non-Wahhabi religious communities. For 15 years, USCIRF has [monitored](#) the content of these textbooks and recommended U.S. government action. In January, Representatives Joe Wilson (R-SC) and William Keating (D-MA) introduced the bipartisan [Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act of 2019](#) (H.R. 554) while Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Ron Wyden (D-OR), and Edward Markey (D-MA) introduced a bipartisan [companion bill](#) in the senate (S.R. 357). The bills would require the State Department to issue an annual report on religious intolerance in Saudi textbooks.

In 2019, the Trump administration continued to strengthen the U.S.-Saudi relationship while Congress pursued a more cautious approach in the wake of a United Nations investigation into the killing of journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi. In February 2019, Saudi Arabia appointed Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud as ambassador to the United States. She is Saudi Arabia’s first woman ambassador.

In July, Congress passed [three bills](#) limiting weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, but the President subsequently vetoed each one. Following an attack on Saudi oil facilities that both the United States and Saudi Arabia [attributed to Iran](#), the United States announced it would deploy [1,800 additional troops](#) to the Kingdom.

To improve religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia, Congress should:

- Adopt legislation requiring the State Department to publicly report on inflammatory and intolerant content in government-issued textbooks.
And, with Congress the administration should:
- Call upon the Saudi government to release religious prisoners of conscience, including Raif Badawi and his counsel, Waleed Abu el-Khair.
- Press Saudi Arabia to continue to dismantle the religious guardianship system and release from prison activists who have peacefully protested it.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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